

Laos Begins Drive for Plain of Jars

By D. E. Ronk

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VIENTIANE, July 7—Little opposition is being met by CIA-supported Meo units under the command of Maj. Gen. Vang Pao as they build their rainy season offensive in northern Laos on to the Plain of Jars from Long Cheng.

Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces appear to be withdrawing north and west off the 30-mile-square upland plain they have held since its recapture from Meo forces in early 1970, according to informed sources in Vientiane.

Striking northeast and northwest of their mountain base just south of the plain, the irregulars reoccupied Ban Na, overlooking key passes into Long Cheng, early last week. Then they struck at Xieng Khoang airfield 30 miles east, occupying it late in the week.

Since occupying the airfield 100 miles northeast of Vientiane and beginning their commando raids, Meo soldiers have uncovered significant amounts of enemy armaments, including 122-mm rockets and small arms, strewn in the open.

Vang Pao is not at the scene of the fighting, according to informed sources, but is recovering from a serious illness. Command of the Meo troops is believed to be held by a committee of four junior officers working with American advisers.

Informed sources in Vientiane say that the offensive thrusts onto the plain are being made in order to improve Vang Pao's defensive positions around Long Cheng.

Other sources say, however, that the commando units are launching offensive forays northward along the east and west rims of the plain. They say a major offensive buildup is well under way.

Traffic by heavy duty transport planes of Air America into the Xieng Khoang field is reported as "constant," even under extremely hazardous weather conditions.

Pilots ferrying troops and materiel report only sporadic groundfire.

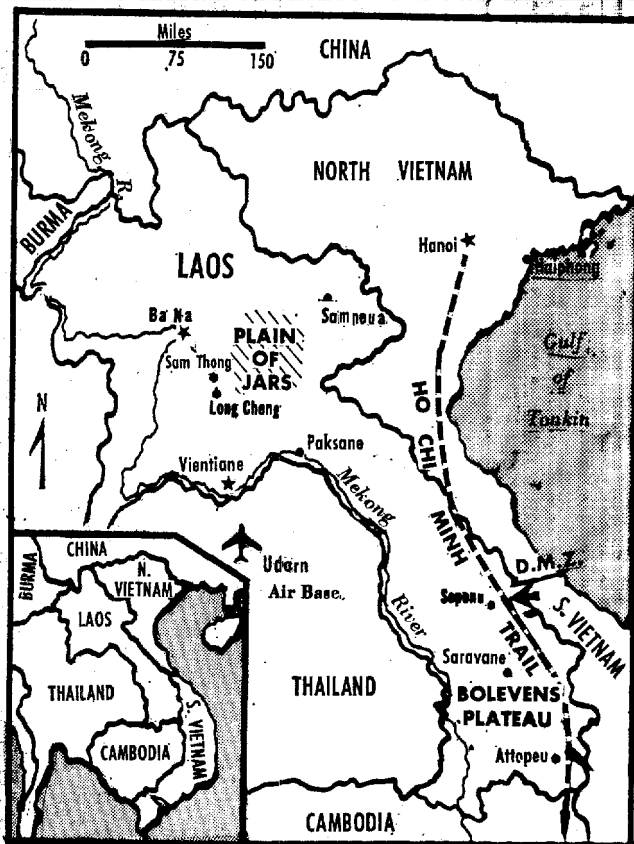
A general news blackout on the situation in the Plain of Jars is being maintained.

Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma. Neither Phouma nor American spokesmen will comment on the offensive moves, nor on whether there is an official blackout in effect.

Radio Pathet Lao from Sam Neua City, the Pathet Lao headquarters 175 miles northeast of here, is carrying news of offensive moves in the Xieng Khoang area, however, claiming that three regiments of Vang Pao's "mercenaries" supported by "mercenary Thai artillerymen" and heavy American bombing are invading "liberated zones."

There is considerable speculation in Vientiane over the parallels between the current offensive moves and those during 1969 when Vang Pao captured the plain following heavy bombing. The Pathet Lao recaptured the plain in early 1970.

American sources deny that a general offensive of that scope is planned, and even express fear of such a move because of the Meo army's weakened condition, but as one informant said, "Vang Pao is very much his own man, and no matter what anyone says, he does pretty much what he wants."



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